

CLASS 11 : PUCCINI GOES WEST

A. ACT ONE

1. Class title 1 (Deborah Voigt)
2. First night at the Met

On 10 December 1910, the Metropolitan Opera in New York presented its first-ever world premiere. The composer, **Giacomo Puccini** (1858–1924), was the reigning King of Italian Opera. The story was by **David Belasco** (1853–1931), the Neil Simon of Broadway at the time, one of whose many dozen plays had already been adapted by the composer as the wildly successful *Madama Butterfly*. And this one, *The Girl of the Golden West* in Belasco's title or *La fanciulla del West* in Puccini's, even had an American setting: a mining-camp saloon in the California Gold Rush of 1849. Imagine you are in that glittering first-night audience: how would this opening scene have come over you then? How does it come across now? And for later reference, what do you so far make of Minnie, the owner of the bar and title character?

3. Puccini: *La fanciulla del West*, opening scene
4. — still from the above

I want your reactions but am not sure how to elicit them. I guess the best question is How American is it? Or to put it another way, How realistic is it? Puccini was the last great composer in the **verismo** tradition; the word literally means “realism,” but it might be more aptly translated as “**the-skillful-use-of-detail-from-ordinary-life-to-create-a-drama-of-maximum-emotional-intensity.**” Puccini certainly delivers on the emotional intensity, as you will shortly see in Acts II and III, both of which I shall play almost complete. But when I look at that detail-from-ordinary-life now, I don't see realism so much as **artificiality**: the skill with which Puccini choreographs the scene to take us through a whole seismograph of sensations in a short time. As a comparison, let me show you the first minute of the trailer for the production by **Christof Loy** in Stockholm; it begins exactly as the full production does, then cuts to further on in the first scene. Tell me what you think.

5. Stockholm production trailer, opening sequence
6. Set for the Christof Loy production

Did that do anything for you? I bought the DVD thinking it would be a “solution” to the problems that were all too clear in the Met production, because Loy's evocation of old movie Westerns seemed to offer a different approach to realism, with a more familiar kind of artifice. But Minnie bursting through that screen is artifice of a different kind again. And I found Loy's shallow but wide stage to be ungainly and not easily understandable in relation to the era portrayed by the costumes. Later, though, I came to understand why he does it: he wants a large flat surface on which to project black-and-white movies of the action that is simultaneously going on below, as in this second clip from the trailer.

7. **Stockholm production trailer, closing sequence**
8. — still from the above

Loy recognizes, I think, that there are many melodramatic and over-the-top moments in this opera that we would have had no trouble accepting in a B&W movie, and so wants us to give the opera the same benefit of the doubt. But he doesn't use the device consistently enough, and he ignores the fact that we regularly give opera the benefit of the doubt as it is. The bottom line, I think, is that once the audience has got past the first 20 minutes of the opera, they will be inclined to forget the problems. So now I am changing my usual tune: sometimes it is not a matter of *solving* problems, so much as *accepting* them. And the power of Acts II and III is such as to make this easy enough to do, at least in terms of setting.

9. **Deborah Voigt and Marcello Giordani in *La fanciulla del West* (Met 2010)**

Nevertheless, I have to admit that there are two other problems that are not so easily solved. One is the **music**. Puccini thought it was his best opera; musicologists have agreed in terms of its orchestration and harmonic daring, but the fact remains that there is only one stand-alone aria (for the tenor in the last act), and none of his great tunes. Then there are those extraordinary contradictions built into the role of **Minnie**: the gun-toting saloon owner who offers Bible-reading classes to her customers, a strange combination of woman-of-the-world and prude. Watch her in Act II, and see what you think.

B. ACT TWO

Quick background: there are three main characters: **Minnie**, whom we have already met; Sheriff **Jack Rance**, who hopes to marry Minnie, although he already has a wife; and the bandit **Ramirrez**, who comes in halfway through Act I, giving his name as **Dick Johnson**. Johnson and Minnie make an instant connection, and she invites him to visit her later. The other woman you will glimpse briefly is Minnie's native American servant **Wowkle**—another piece of ethnic stereotyping that we'd be best to ignore.

10. **Puccini: *La fanciulla del West*, central scenes of Act II**
11. **Class title 2 (still from the above)**

I am making a small cut here. Jack Rance arrives with a posse, looking for "Dick Johnson," but Minnie hides him. Then as they are leaving, they reveal their discovery that he is really the bandit Ramirrez. Realizing that he has lied to her, Minnie turns to him in fury. In many ways, I find the short scene that follows the most emotionally compelling moment in the opera.

12. **Puccini: *La fanciulla del West*, end of Act II**
13. — still from the above

It seems to me that there was a **blooper** here; did anyone catch it? When Minnie cheats to win the last hand of poker, she pulls the three aces out of her sock—but the backs of the cards are different! The Met does not usually make mistakes like this, so I assume the discrepancy was deliberate. But why then did Rance, an experienced poker player with so much to lose, not check?!

C. ACT THREE

14. Class title 3 (End of the Rope)

I'll play as much of the last act as possible, starting from the moment when Ramirrez, on the run again, is captured and brought to Sheriff Rance. I find the lynch mob mentality of this scene believable in a way that nothing in the opening sequence ever was. And it provides the context for the bandit's last words, in the aria "*Ch'ella mi creda libero e lontano*" (Let her believe me free and far away), which is the one standalone number in the whole opera. **Marcello Giordani** sings it beautifully.

We all know how a Puccini opera ends: the soprano heroine dies and everybody weeps at the tragedy. Right? But this heroine is made of different stuff, as you will see.

15. Puccini: *La fanciulla del West*, end of Act III

16. — still from the above

I hope you see why I played the scene of Minnie's Bible lesson in the first hour; it gave her a moral influence over the men that she might otherwise not have had. I must say that, not knowing the end of the opera, I was on the edge of my seat until the curtain closed. When Rance bent down to pick up the pistol, I was sure he would shoot Ramirrez in the back. He didn't, but I do find Puccini's happy ending ask us to take a step too far in the willing suspension of disbelief. But at least Giancarlo del Monaco didn't take the route of the updated production currently playing in Vienna. In this instance, fidelity to the original really does seem the best way to go.

17. Class title 4 (Act III in Vienna)